



Strangers in the Night

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was to keep
my head outside of
the cockpit.

By LCdr. James Haas

I was in the hawking pattern, overhead mother, doing the tanking thing—it was Viking hog heaven. Your standard, real dark, stormy, Adriatic night was playing boogieman outside our canopy, but we were undaunted.

“All-weather tanking,” that’s our motto. So, to expedite package checks, we were hawked off the deck by the offgoing S-3B, side number 702. The sooner we were package-checked sweet, the sooner we could bug out and fly our single-cycle alternate mission. After all, departure control could decide they really wanted us overhead for this recovery, too. We joined up for the check while earning our doctorates in heavy-weather avoidance.

Green light, good flow, “701, sweet tanker, 12 over three, requesting switch to mission.”

“Return overhead and hawk this recovery, report overhead angels four.”

Denied, they need us—we are loved.

“701, roger, ” wilco, over and out.

Bummer, so much for our alternate mission. We knew the on-station A-6, hose No. 1, already was checked and was buzzing around overhead at 3K, keeping an eye on the recovery. Just as we finished our checks and turned back toward mother, button 14 became a whirlwind of activity. A Hornet was sent up to 3,000 feet off the bolter for a re-fill amidst continued package checks and mission tanking taking place

at various altitudes. So, now we're back overhead, hose No. 2, past point one, 4,000 feet, and I'm busy tucking away the donuts (till later) and the area charts (for some other night). The little voices in my head tonight were all from departure. A flurry of "kick-tanker common" and "report plugged and receiving" calls were making for fascinating listening.

Suddenly, hidden among all the colorful comms on 14 came, "515, say your angels."

He replied, "We're overhead angels four, heading 180, abeam the ship at four now."

Hey, I wasn't born yesterday. Except for the heading, which was 90 out, 515 was reporting our position to departure. How could that be? Maybe they just were confused, but I felt all funny inside anyway.

My mind was awash with millions of tiny synaptic divergences, which suddenly pulled my face out of my helmet bag and pointed it out my side canopy.

Let's see, constant bearing, decreasing range—where have I heard that before? I had about enough time to gently push forward on the stick with about the sensitivity level that 30 cc's of adrenaline pumped into my right ventricle would create. Though blessed with two anchors between my wings, I frequently am encumbered by a set of flight controls between my legs. Such is the topsy-turvy world of an S-3 flight officer. My driver's one-anchor brain was trying to figure out why his stick was moving without the aid of his hand.

Simultaneously, at least in my mind, I managed, "Traffic, 3 o'clock," or something very near to that. Realistically, I think I just let fly with an expletive and pushed on the trees-get-bigger control. About that time, an A-6, complete with an attached FA-18 sucking gas, passed about 200 feet (as reported later by CATCC) over the top of us, which is bad. OK departure, where do you really want us?

I had the rest of a relatively quiet flight to consider two points: What should I do to avoid this type of undesirable, nonbriefed rendezvous in the future, and how could I get my knees to work right before we landed. The big lesson I relearned was to keep my head outside of the cockpit. Maintaining a vigilant lookout doctrine, especially overhead mother, day or night, is about the first thing they try to teach us back in P'cola. I was reminded of a fam stage instructor who became very frustrated with me for not scanning for the traffic I just had told departure I was looking for. Years later, as an instructor myself, I made establishing a good lookout doctrine one of my points to emphasize.

With very few exceptions, nothing in your lap is worth a confetti ride to the deck. Well, the big sky, little aircraft theory had proven itself false yet again. I, for one, was a new man. I had learned my lesson and gotten to live, too. I've got that going for me, which is nice. 🦅

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